

# Lawmakers' efforts to comply with school funding mandate spur frustration

Sen. Rivers says she believes Legislature will meet 2018 deadline



The legislative building in Olympia houses the Senate and House chambers. (Stevie Mathieu/Columbian files)

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Lawmakers' latest school funding proposal was blasted Monday as the "kick-the-can plan" and a "plan for a plan."

"We're frustrated this bill continues to punt," Dan Steele, with the Washington Association of School Administrators, told lawmakers on Monday.

There have been work groups, task forces, multiple studies, Steele said.

"We think now is the time for action," he said.

Sen. Ann Rivers, R-La Center, the local lawmaker who is on the governor's task force charged with tackling the under-funding of the state's public schools, agreed.

"I'm sick to death of talking about McCleary, and a lot of other people are, too," Rivers said of the court case that resulted in an order that lawmakers must fulfill their paramount duty under the state constitution and adequately fund the state's public schools. But tackling more specifics in the 60-day legislative session, Rivers said, "wasn't in the cards."

Instead, the latest proposal calls for analyzing what the total tab for funding the state's public school system will be.

The state's top court, which has held the Legislature in contempt of court, has directed lawmakers to end a reliance on local school levies to pay for basic education. Seven Clark County districts, including the two largest, are asking voters to approve levies on Feb. 9.

Rivers said the latest proposal will help lawmakers understand how different school districts use levy money and pinpoint the size of the funding crisis.

"You hear \$2.8 billion and you'll hear \$7 billion, and we have no idea and it really matters," Rivers said.

The latest proposal will also ensure the governor's task force stays intact and continues to work to solve the problem.

The state Supreme Court is fining the Legislature \$100,000 per day until it comes up with a solution.

Although Rivers was hoping the task force would unveil more concrete proposals and perhaps identify a funding stream, she's confident lawmakers will meet a 2018 deadline to agree on a solution.

"I wouldn't say this if I didn't believe it to be true. I do believe we're going to meet the 2018 deadline. There's no doubt in my mind," Rivers said.

Even though the latest proposal was criticized for not going far enough, anything related to McCleary could be a battle in the divided Legislature, Rivers said.

"There are some legislators who say 'The Supreme Court is not the boss of me and I won't support anything' (and that) they have overstepped their constitutional bounds," Rivers said. "Part of me agrees, but this doesn't mean we don't have a serious problem to address."

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